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It's a big story, but nobody involved wants it covered

by ANNE-MARIE O'CONNOR

Somewhere deep in the mountains of southern Honduras — in an off-limits area sealed with military roadblocks and ringed with clusters of land mines — U.S.-backed Nicaraguan rebels are preparing to step up their war against the Sandinistas. The signs of war are everywhere: mysterious arms shipments arriving in Honduran ports; infighting among Honduran officers over profits from the rebel-supply business; the resettling of Honduran peasants forced out of a border "emergency zone" by battles between Sandinista troops and the contras; a CIA helicopter that crash-landed next to the largest shopping mall in Tegucigalpa, the nation's capital. But almost no one wants journalists — foreign or domestic — to cover this war, and the obstacles placed in their way make reporting on this conflict "in our own backyard" peculiarly difficult.

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Many of the obstacles have been erected by the Honduran government. Recently, President Jose Azcona tightened the enforcement of a ban on entrance to the emergency zone — a 450-square-mile area of El Paraiso province that has become known as "New Nicaragua" because more than 12,000 Honduran residents have fled from it, leaving the region to the contras and their families. Reluctant to have its role as host to the contras publicized, the Hondurans seek to suppress news about the foreign army on their soil — except when such news serves their own interests.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the border, the Sandinistas — reluctant to acknowledge the spread of a war they like to portray as a U.S.-initiated conflict that is expensive to contain but not a serious threat — are cutting down on the number of permits allowing journalists to enter the embattled region.

And then there are the contras themselves. They don't like reporters appearing unexpectedly or wandering freely around camps which they still publicly claim are inside Nicaragua. Moreover, they have long been worried that critical coverage might reduce their chances of securing further U.S. aid.

"It's increasingly difficult to cover this war," says Marjorie Miller, a *Los Angeles Times* reporter in Central America. "The contras have restricted access on their side for some time, and now that the fighting is heating up, the Sandinistas are restricting access to the war on their side." Miller adds that the contras are "very suspicious of any journalists who have worked in Nicaragua and are very quick to label journalists pro-Sandinistas. They only let a small group of journalists into their camps and into their confidence."

Over the past few years the Honduran

government's attitude toward coverage of the contras has fluctuated in ways that reflect shifts in the country's military and political leadership, as well as such developments as Congress's cutoff of aid to the contras in October 1984 and the downing in Nicaragua of a contra-supply plane in October 1986. John Lantigua of UPI was one of the first foreign reporters to cover the growing rebel presence on a daily basis. He was expelled from Honduras in May 1983. Authorities said he was "denigrating the image of Honduras" in violation of the country's immigration law. However, when a U.S. official later asked the country's then president, Roberto Suazo Cordova, if Lantigua would ever be allowed to return, Suazo said no, explaining, according to the official, "He is a communist."

During this time the military chief was General Gustavo Alvarez Martinez. A close U.S. ally and a vehement anti-communist, Alvarez oversaw the establishment of the contra presence in Honduras when he assumed command in 1982. So long as he remained head of the military, domestic reporters were forbidden to mention that the contras were based in Honduras; thus, they could not report on the disruptive effect the contra presence was having on the country. Meanwhile, contra leaders were able to use money provided by the CIA to assure favorable coverage of their movement (see "Contra Coverage — Paid for by the CIA," CJR, March/April).

Alvarez was ousted as head of the military in March 1984 and it was his successor, General Walter Lopez, who sealed off the rebel zone, thus ending an era when, while the government officially denied that it was supporting the contras, reporters could drive right up to the gates of the rebels' camps. At this time, too, the military embarked on an effort to persuade the U.S. to increase its aid to Honduras and, as part of that effort, began leaking stories to U.S. reporters. Some of these stories were highly critical of the rebels, in an apparent effort to show the cost of Honduran support. In January 1985, for example, military sources told journalists they had evidence that the contras had participated in several political assassinations and in the "disappearances" of Honduran leftists and opposition figures that had taken place while Alvarez was in charge of the military. While some evidence existed to support this charge, the story seemed clearly designed to deflect attention from a human-rights investigation into the activities of a Honduran anti-terrorist unit to which even fellow Honduran officers attributed most of the killings and disappearances. U.S. intelligence sources, caught off guard by the appearance of the story in the Honduran press, first thought it must have originated in Managua.

Honduran military leaks, especially those involving U.S. covert programs, continue to infuriate U.S. military intelligence officials. "They can't understand why the Hondurans are leaking information to the press that is detrimental [to the contras]," says one State Department official. "But what is happening is that the Hondurans are beginning to give out information deliberately, in response to their own agenda, just like [politicians] in Washington."

One apparently leaked story was an October 1985 account by Noe Leiva, a reporter for the Tegucigalpa daily *El Tiempo* and a UPI stringer. It appeared at a time when President Suazo was allowing anti-contra stories to appear in an effort to pressure the U.S. to allow him to stay in power beyond his term. Leiva reported that a rebel warehouse and training ground was located, not up in the mountains, but in the compound of Honduras's First Infantry Battalion on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa. This exposé was followed by a spate of contra coverage in the domestic press. Among many leading military and government officials there was increasing frustration and anger at the way the rebel presence was being managed; meanwhile, anti-contra sentiment was rife in the border areas where the contras were encamped. General Lopez, although staunchly anti-Sandinista, thought the rebel movement was corrupt and poorly led and wanted the rebel troops out of the country. In February 1986, a group of ultra-conservative, pro-U.S. colonels ousted Lopez as military chief and installed General Humberto Regalado. Honduran intelligence officers began calling in reporters from the nation's papers for tough talks and began trying to draw up a strategy to deal with the growing public outcry over the contras' presence. The new stance was reflected in an article in the April issue of the military monthly *Proyecciones Militares*, which warned that the local press corps had been infiltrated by "terrorists," some of whom it said had graduated from Moscow's Patrice Lumumba University. The article seemed shrill and overblown even to the military's closest allies in the conservative journalists' guild, which protested that no Honduran journalists were known to have graduated from the university.

Given such a climate, running the risk of offending both the government and the contras would seem to be asking for

CJR/Ron Kinney/Black Star

Honduran exposé: *Noe Leiva of* El Tiempo *revealed the presence of a contra training ground on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa.*

trouble. This, however, is exactly what Rodrigo Wong Arevalo — director of Radio America, the most-listened-to station in the nation — did when, last summer, he aired a series of editorials opposing the contra presence and also a series on a scandal involving tens of thousands of dollars' worth of embezzled government funds. In the early morning hours of August 4, a week after he had broadcast the last of his series of anti-contra editorials, a car bomb exploded outside his home. No evidence has been uncovered to suggest who might have planted the bomb; Arevalo himself says he has no idea who might have been behind the bombing. Several Honduran journalists, however, interpreted the incident as a warning to lay off the contras. "The feeling is that, if

you write something about the contras, something could happen to you," says Gustavo Palencia, a reporter for *El Tiempo* and this year's winner of Honduras's most coveted journalism prize, the Medardo Mejia award.

Palencia is one of the handful of Honduran journalists who, at local press conferences, ask hard questions about the rebels and the U.S. military presence. This past December his name was crossed off a list of reporters who were to be allowed to enter the sealed-off zone along the country's southern border. When his paper demanded an explanation for his exclusion, the military replied that they did not like his coverage. When the newspaper's owner, Jaime Rosenthal, who is also vice-president of Honduras, pressed General Regalado for an explanation, Regalado replied that Palencia was believed to be "a Sandinista spy." The label is routinely applied to reporters whose coverage of the contras displeases the authorities.

In a recent conversation, Regalado made it clear that the label could also be applied to foreign journalists, saying, "There are those among the foreign journalists who support communism." When asked what sort of stories he thought reflected communist tendencies, he cited photographs of Honduran prostitutes and articles describing Honduras's role as host to the rebels that had appeared recently in U.S. and other foreign publications.

"It's the McCarthy era down here," says Laura Brooks, a twenty-seven-year-old stringer for the Voice of America whom the agency let go, with no explanation, in September 1986. "Whatever they can spread around about you, especially if it has to do with communism or left-wing sympathies, they say — whether they believe it's true or not, whether it hurts your career or not." According to two sources — one connected with a U.S. intelligence agency, the other a congressional aide — the recommendation to drop Brooks came from the National Security Council after it had received a report from intelligence officials in Tegucigalpa that Brooks was suspected of being soft on the Sandinistas. Brooks says she subsequently learned that VOA reporters had heard rumors in Washington to the effect that she had a close personal relationship with a Sandinista agent posted in Honduras. "If they really believe that," says Brooks, who was, she says, a Reagan supporter when he ran for re-election, "it's a pretty sad comment on the state of U.S. intelligence."

U.S. officials in Tegucigalpa keep a close watch on what U.S. reporters write. Meanwhile, as sources, these officials are not always reliable. When the home of a leading Honduran businessman was shot up by Honduran police last August — a time during which the military was squabbling internally over profits from the rebel-supply industry — U.S. embassy sources told several journalists that the incident had nothing to do with any Honduran military involvement in the supply trade. This point of view was at variance with that of practically everyone else in Tegucigalpa, including the businessman himself, who openly complained that the shooting was an attempt, led by the head of military intelligence, to edge him out.

To cite another instance: a month before a rebel aid package was defeated in Congress in October 1984, the embassy arranged for a foreign journalist to meet with a Nicaraguan teenager who claimed to have been kidnapped by Sandinista soldiers in northern Nicaragua and sexually abused by them for eight months. However, the journalist happened to have met this same girl at a contra hospital six months before, on which occasion she had been introduced as "the youngest girl contra." When the journalist mentioned this to the embassy official who had set up the "exclusive," the girl's interview with the Honduran press the next day was cancelled.

Honduran authorities are no more reliable. In April 1985, following the shelling by the Sandinistas of the Honduran village of Español Grande — it was after this shelling, incidentally, that the rebel-occupied zone was sealed off — the Honduran military assured journalists that the contras were not in that

area. But two foreign journalists who ignored their military escort's instructions to remain with a press group taken into the area stumbled on the home of a contra commander whose nom de guerre is Tiro al Blanco. His troops had been hiding there during the journalists' visit and, when the two reporters approached the house, soldiers jumped off the porch and fled into a cornfield.

An unauthorized horseback ride into the rebel zone of El Paraiso province by two reporters last May made it clear why neither the contras nor their Honduran hosts nor their Reagan administration backers welcome uninhibited coverage. The reporters — Sam Dillon of *The Miami Herald* and I — did not get to see any top rebel leaders, but we were able to observe the considerable impact the rebels' presence had had on the so-called New Nicaragua area. The major town in the region, Capire, had the lawless feeling of an Alaskan gold-rush-era town. Most of its inhabitants were armed Nicaraguan men who, beer can or bottle in hand, seemed to have gotten a head start on the approaching Saturday night. One rebel, whose cap and T-shirt proclaimed him to be "Diablo" (the devil), sliced the air with a combat knife which, he boasted, had been supplied by the $27 million aid package. Another rode through the town's dusty main street on a white horse, an AK-47 held high. Others carried tape players blasting Michael Jackson's "Thriller" album.

It was difficult to find a Honduran; most of the village's native inhabitants had moved out after a battle nearby between the contras and the Sandinistas. A religious worker said that, around the time of the battle, more than a dozen Honduran peasants had been killed by one side or the other.

Such a visit, of course, provided only a partial picture of the rebels, who can count among their numbers many young, determined peasant recruits who have no ties to the Somoza regime and whose dedication to the struggle lends validity to their cause. But partial views are almost inevitable so long as the rebels shut out reporters, as they recently did for more than a year. "They handle their relations with the press quite badly," says James LeMoyne, the *New York Times* reporter who, along with Christopher Dickey of *The Washington Post*, was on the first reporting trip with the rebels in March 1983 and who was the only mainstream print correspondent allowed into their camps this past February. The contras' wary attitude toward the press is understandable, LeMoyne says, "because there are things they don't particularly want publicized: human-rights abuses, the continuing influence of Somoza-era politicians and businessmen and National Guard officers." What makes the story complicated, he adds, is that "when you meet the peasant recruits you realize that this is a very traditional Latin American army, in which the mass of fighting men bear very little resemblance to the people commanding them. They are very conservative people from northern Nicaragua who do have genuine grievances against the Sandinistas."

As a reporter, LeMoyne says, it is necessary to try to understand the contras' reasons for fighting, but, he adds, "it's also important to remember that . . . there are as many or more Nicaraguans with the Sandinistas who feel that they have equally legitimate reasons for fighting to defend the revolution and to defeat the contras. So the question for the reporter isn't the authenticity or the truthfulness of the struggle on either side; our job is simply to do the best we can to make sure our readers understand the views of the people on both sides of this conflict." ■